

WHILE I'VE BREATH...

June 10, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Matthew 28:16-20

Exodus 3:1-12

"Praise befits the upright."

-Psalm 33:1b (RSV)

Forty percent of the American people will go to church this morning. That is an amazing statistic. It's down from fifty percent a generation ago but it is much higher than the percentage of churchgoers at the time of the American Revolution, or in any other nation. Forty percent. What they do when they get there will vary widely, from High Mass in vaulted Gothic cathedrals, to the orderly format of the Presbyterians - three hymns and a sermon - to the folksy informality of a small rural Methodist congregation where the pastoral prayer serves as the community's newsletter, to exuberant singing and clapping in the black churches of the city. The one thing all of it has in common, all this church-going, is that it affirms the belief that human life is lived out beneath, or within, or in the context of, the Holy, the Sacred. All this unlikely church-going is eloquent testimony to a truth we are not always very good at explaining, namely that human life is most human when it is open to that which is more than human. And furthermore that we ought to do it, not only for God's glory, but for ourselves... As the Psalmist put it:

"Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright!"

All this church-going bears witness to the fact that in a society which seems on the surface to be decidedly secular, a lot of people continue to believe that there is something inherently good and valuable in devoting time to placing our little lives in a larger context. It is certainly not because it's the most exciting or alluring activity available to us. In fact, it can be pretty dull.

A campus pastor friend of mine used to say that if the proverbial visitor from another planet stumbled into an average Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning he'd conclude that someone had died and people had gathered for corporate mourning.

It has been suggested to me that if clergy want to know how uninteresting and boring going to church is, they should spend a Sunday morning or two at home and get the kids up, dressed, fed, and in the pew

for the opening hymn. Clergy, I am reminded, have the luxury, because of their Sunday morning absence from the home, of assuming that children, their own included, want nothing more than to be in church. Some of us, of course, do know better. I never look out from a pulpit without remembering the family whose three children were in junior high and whose family rules included going to church weekly, no questions asked, and whose family pew was directly in front of the preacher. He was an old-school father whose response to the suggestion that children should be given as many choices as possible was, "I always give them a choice. They can do what I tell them to do - or live somewhere else. The choice is theirs..." a conversation, I imagine, that took place with some regularity about 8:30 on Sunday morning. Anyhow, I couldn't miss them. The parents sat on each end, solid - like strong bookends. The girl always sat in the middle, slouched, gazing at the roof, counting ceiling tiles. She separated her sullen brothers, who always sat forward for the entire service with their heads in their hands, like men about to be taken to the gallows. It was sobering for the preacher to see this every week and to know that not everyone shares in the act with equal enthusiasm. The parents, of course, believed that being there was important and valuable. I agreed with them then and I still do. But I do wish it didn't feel so uninteresting and dull and boring. I do wish this activity could universally exhibit more life and beauty and majesty and mystery.

Philosopher Sam Keen tells a wonderful story about sitting in his first-grade classroom on a depressing afternoon, practicing what we used to call "penmanship," listening to the teacher's monotone, "Make your i's come all the way up to the middle line. And don't forget to make your o's nice and round. Circle, circle, period. Now repeat."

"Caught between boredom and despair I
struggled against tears and settled in to wait for
the resurrection - the three o'clock bell.

"And then it happened. A movement in a tree outside the window caught my eye and there, in the sweet and redeeming light of the springtime world, was a summer warbler building a nest. Caught in wonder I followed the progress of the nest construction and dreamt of the time when I would be a great ornithologist. My i's and o's were forgotten until Mrs. Jones materialized over my shoulder and demanded to know why three lines in my penmanship book were empty. Instinct warned me that no serendipitous warbler, no private fascination, could provide an excuse for the neglect of my serious educational duties. So I bit my tongue, cherished my wonder in silence, and stayed in after school to make up my lessons.

"Mrs. Jones won more than the day. Schooling became a habit for me and I remained in the classroom for twenty-five years and five degrees without seriously questioning the maxim that private enthusiasm must be divorced from the educational task." [To A Dancing God, p. 38-39]

Keen goes on from there to write an exquisite little essay on the absence of the experience of wonder from his own education and from much of modern life.

Worship begins with the human experience of wonder. All religion, Frederick Buechner wrote, is at its heart, mystical...

"Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of the Jordan. Each of them responds to something for which words like - God - are only pallid, alphabetical souvenirs... Religion as an institution, as ethics, as dogma, as social action, all of this comes later. Religion starts, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky." [The Alphabet of Grace, p. 14]

That's exactly what happened one day out in the wilderness of Midian when young Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep. Mose's religion was anything but boring. He was a refugee actually. He had been an Egyptian official. You remember his story: born into the Jewish community in Egypt, saved from Pharaoh's murder of the Jewish babies - floating in a basket in the bullrushes, brought up in the royal household by Pharaoh's daughter; he rose in rank and prestige until the day he saw an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Jews and in a rage he had killed the Egyptian. So he ran to the wilderness, to a safe and stable married life, with a secure job in the family business. And it's out in the wilderness, minding the store, that the bush catches fire and the voice calls:

"Moses, Moses - take your shoes off - you're standing on Holy Ground." And having gotten Moses' attention, in fact, having put the fear of God in his heart, the voice then summons Moses to his mission... "I have seen the affliction of my people... I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people - out of Egypt."

The experience of Moses in the wilderness of Midian is a Biblical prototype.

Biblical religion begins with an experience of the Holy, a mystical experience that cannot always be explained rationally.

Biblical religion begins when the person to whom the experience has been given responds to it - in awe, fear, wonder - by kneeling, falling on his face, taking off his shoes - in worship, if you will.

Biblical religion happens when the mystical experience evokes worship and the worshiper hears a summons to action. "Put your shoes back on and get on down to Egypt and lead my people into freedom." Mystical experiences are not given for their entertainment value in the Bible. Worship is not an end in itself. It all leads to pilgrimage, to the faithful living out of the divine summons. "Pick up and move, Abraham." Go back to Egypt, Moses. Go to the palace, Elijah. Put down your nets, James

and John, and follow me. Come down from the mountain, Peter, into the valley. Go into all the world."

Biblical religion begins with a lump in the throat, proceeds as we respond in worship and eventuates in action, in life lived differently in the world. Sometimes the process doesn't work because we never get to the action. Religion remains in the Sanctuary, a private affair. Religious experience makes us feel good. Religion is intentionally and successfully irrelevant. But sometimes the process doesn't work because we pay exclusive attention to the results, the behavioral product, the life lived in the world, and no attention to the experience of the Holy and the appropriate worshipful response. Much of the influential religious thinking and writing in our day has focused on the practical results, the difference religion actually makes in the life of the world, and has scolded religious institutions for not making the connection between what they believe and how people act. Certainly that is a relevant word. But, equally relevant actually - a prior word - is about the Holy, the mystical, the transcendent. Equally relevant is the human experience of wonder, awe, worship.

That's the theme of one of this century's classic theological texts, The Idea of the Holy, by Rudolf Otto. He wrote:

"It may come sweeping like a gentle tide... it may burst in sudden eruptions up from the depths of the soul... It may become the hushed, trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."

Rudolf Otto called it The *Mysterium Tremendum*, the wholly other. It is where faith begins - with some sense that there is a reality that does not fit into the neat categories by which we understand and describe all the rest... there is something wholly other.

There is a lot of poetry and literature about it. In fact, the arts have always been and continue to be one of the ways human beings bear witness to that which is larger than human life.

Annie Dillard in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek:

"Something pummels us, something heavily sheathed. Power broods and lights. We're played on like a pipe. Our breath is not our own... The world is fairly strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But - and this is the question - Who gets excited about a mere penny?" [p. 13-15]

The truth is that, until fairly recently, the scientific, high-tech mind-set which has characterized the 20th century, has dissipated mystery and with it, the human experience of wonder. There is a sense in which modernity has been a conspiracy against mystery. Mostly it has been a good thing. When you need major surgery, it is far better, I would submit, to rely on the highly technical equipment and the very objective judgment of

the machines and people in the operating room rather than a shaman chanting mantras in the waiting room. The downside is that when there is no mystery... there is no wonder. And when there is no wonder, something of the truth about humankind is lost as well. If human life may be defined in terms of the functioning of bodily systems, the end of life may be comfortably defined as the time when nothing we can do technologically can any longer sustain those systems and - given the magnificent achievements in medical technology - that mechanical sustaining can go on for a very long time. But all you need to do is stand by the bedside of a man or woman or child - whose body systems are sustained by tubes and hoses and pumps and bags and bottles - to know that there is not always something good... but sometimes something very wrong going on. Or to ponder the fact that there is no legal way for families and loved ones to assist a patient who is terminally ill and without hope - except for this excruciatingly drawn-out process of high-tech dying. There is no way to assist that person to die with dignity, to understand how inadequate science and objectivity are, to define human life apart from mystery.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of our century's great philosophers said: "...indifference to the sublime wonder of living lies behind all the evils that have befallen our sorry century. Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which only has to be organized in order to be mastered." [See Madeline L'Engle, A Stone for a Pillow, p. 133]

One of the great intellectual and spiritual revolutions has occurred in our time, as the human race has learned the truth of Heschel's observation... that the worst we have ever done - gassing and cremating millions, dropping atomic bombs on large cities of noncombatants, napalming villages to save them from Communism, executing hundreds of thousands because of political preference - the worst is a result of the absence of the Holy, the Mysterium Tremendum, the wholly other, which confers sanctity on each human life. Helmut Thielicke said it was the only defense against the relentless objectivity and logic of the Nazi master race ideology - which set out to rid society of all non-productive lives, i.e., that each is inexplicably and mysteriously a bearer of the image of God. And the best of it, the art, for instance, the music and dance, architecture, poetry, athletics, all of it testifies to that about us which will not be precisely defined. Even science now testifies. The Hubble telescope peers into an infinite void, a dimension of reality without beginning and end, and we have come full circle. Science now sounding like theology, knowing more thoroughly than anyone has ever known that there is that about us and about all of reality - which is wholly other; that about us which is incomplete until it expresses itself in praise, adoration, worship.

So, let there be more mystery, not less. In the bright world of the city, in the midst of straight clean steel towers, let there be an alternative, a reminder of the sacred. In this magnificent canyon of steel and glass and concrete - shouting the virility of humankind - let there be a small quiet place for balance and sanity. Let our worship remind us of the Holy... let it not be too folksy, because what we are about here is what Moses did when he hid his face and removed his shoes.

Pay attention to those times when praise is called out of you by the magnificence of music, or a gorgeous sunset, or Michael Jordan leaping and hanging there mid-air, defying the natural laws, or the birth of a child, or the quiet passing from life of one you love while you hold her hand. Pay attention to the wonder you are experiencing. Cherish it, nurture it. It is where religion begins.

It is not childlike by the way... this wonder. In her best seller, An American Childhood, Annie Dillard wrote beautifully what we all learn sooner or later, after four or five decades: that children are not as amazed as their parents at the simple fact of being.

"Their parents pause at the unnecessary beauty of an ice storm coating the trees: the children look for something to throw. The children who tape colorful leaves to the school room windows and walls are humoring the teacher. The busy teacher halts on her way to school and stoops to pick up five, bright leaves to show the children - but it is she, now in her sixties, who is increasingly stunned by the leaves, their brightness all so much trash that litters the gutter." [An American Childhood, p. 156]

What the Christian religion does is express this most human of experiences - awe, reverence, wonder - before the Almighty, and refocuses it on an event in history, a life lived among us. The wholly other, we believe, has become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. His life, his death, and his resurrection have become the Christ event; the breaking in from beyond time, of that which we cannot measure, cannot know fully. That's the wonder of it all - the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It's in the best of our worship... and the best of our music, the great hymns of praise and adoration. It is in a hymn Isaac Watts wrote and John Wesley revised. It was Wesley's favorite hymn, he told his congregation two hundred years ago one Sunday before he died, and he died, it is said, with the words on his lips...

"I'll praise my Maker, while I've breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my noble powers."

Our lives begin and end in mystery..., and we live them out in a constant state of wonder - if - we have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts big enough to love. And, if we are wise, and alive and whole, it will find voice in our worship, our adoration, our praise... while we have breath.

"Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright."

Amen.